

Parchment, wampum, letters, and symbols: Expanding the parameters of the Royal Proclamation commemoration

This year marks the 250th anniversary of the Royal Proclamation, but for some reason it does not mark the 250th anniversary of the action taken by Odaawaa Chief Pontiac and others. A piece of paper signed by King George III receives more attention than the actions of this chief and his colleagues. Pontiac loses out in public consciousness and exposure to a piece of parchment that does not have any Anishinaabe signatories.

The Royal Proclamation has been called the Magna Carta of Indian rights and Aboriginal title. However, it was not made for the Anishinaabeg (Ojibwe, Odaawaa, Potawatomi, Nipissing, Mississauga, Algonquin, Saulteux, and Toughkawmiwans) nor the Haudenosaunee, nor any other nations (Menominee, Sauk, Fox, Cree, Sioux, Ho-Chunk); it was made for the settlers and colonial officials. It is a legal document designed as a foundation on which the British could commence dispossessing Native American nations of their land, to affect their Manifest Destiny.

TENTATIVE STEPS TO PEACE: ANISHINAABE-BRITISH RELATIONS AFTER 1760

The Anishinaabeg did not readily accept English plans. In fact, Alexander Henry vividly recounted his first meeting in 1761 with the Michilimackinac Ojibwe Chief Minavavana (Minwewe aka Gichi-Ojibwe). Minavavana clearly stated to Henry:

Englishman, your king has never sent us any presents, nor entered into any treaty with us, wherefore he and we are still at war; and until he does these things we must consider that we have no other father, nor friend among the white men than the King of France.¹

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In September 1761, Sir William Johnson, the newly appointed superintendent of Indian Affairs for northern British North America, had come to remedy the situation and treat with the Anishinaabeg at Detroit. Sir William, escorted by Mississauga Chief Wabbi-commicott, attempted at that time to have 13 nations, including the Odaawaa, Ojibwe, Huron, and Potawatomi, enter into that “antient [*sic*] Covenant Chain formerly existing between us.”²

At this point, the Odaawaa Chief, Macatepilesis [Makatepinesi], the Huron Chief, Anaiaasa, the Mississauga Chief, Wabbi-commicott, and others addressed the British as “Brother,” not “Father.” Each of these chiefs professed their fidelity to the British and claimed that they “are all determined as one man to hold fast by the Covenant Chain forever.”³ It seemed that the British had

concluded a treaty with the Anishinaabeg that required the British to pay tribute to the owners of the land by way of giving presents annually. These efforts by Sir William Johnson, however, were unravelled by General Jeffrey Amherst when he ordered that the “Indian presents” be discontinued following the British Conquest of New France.

PONTIAC'S WAR AND THE TREATY OF NIAGARA

By 1763, the Anishinaabeg's dissatisfaction with British policy soon turned to anger and boiled over into the war that historians often call Pontiac's Rebellion. The Anishinaabeg and many other nations captured a number of forts; but Pontiac and the confederacy were unable to take over Fort Detroit and Fort Pitt. Despite this, the resistance sent a powerful message to the British—a message that forced the British to adjust their policies. Sir William Johnson, cultural intermediary par excellence, advised his superior, General Thomas Gage, in February 1764, that to effect a peace, the British must use the diplomatic process of the nations,

[a]t this Treaty wheresoever held we should tye [*sic*] them down according to their own forms of which they take the most notice, for Example by Exchanging a very large belt with some remarkable & intelligible figures thereon, Expressive of the occasion which should be always shewn at public Meetings, to remind them of their promises. ... The use of frequent Meetings with Indns [*sic*] is here pointed out, They want the use of letters, consequently they must frequently be reminded of their promises, & this custom they keep up strictly, amongst themselves,

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since the neglect of the one, will prove a breach of the other.⁴

While Johnson stated that the purpose of the frequent meetings was to remind the Anishinaabeg of their promises, it actually worked the other way too: the Anishinaabeg took the opportunity to remind the British of their promises.

The intelligible symbols woven in wampum were two men holding hands, flanked by links of a chain with the date 1764. Johnson assembled representatives from many nations at Niagara in July 1764 and, on behalf of King George III, entered into a treaty relationship with them. At the conclusion of this meeting, Johnson distributed medals that the Anishinaabeg later used as a mnemonic device of the treaty proceedings. The various nations, on their part, delivered calumet pipes, wampum, and beaver blankets to Johnson.

In Johnson's speech to the assembled nations, he did not directly translate the Royal Proclamation. Instead, he used figurative speech and metaphorical language. Johnson spoke of an unextinguishable fire, a poker, an unending supply of wood, a mat to recline upon, and a ship that would always be filled with "warmth" or necessary goods. Johnson also compared the British nation, and the King, to the rising red sun, represented emblematically by the British soldiers wearing red. He also—unequivocally—stated that the King acknowledged that the nations owned the land and offered the nations "protection" from unscrupulous traders and speculators.

THE LEGACY OF THE TREATY OF NIAGARA

Since the delivery of the wampum at Niagara, this agreement has been "always shewn at public Meetings," and recited in council, and therefore, considered an active, living treaty. Note that the councils did not use a printed copy of the Royal Proclamation; the Anishinaabeg's "want of letters" dic-

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tated the use of memory and mnemonic devices. The British, and the current successor Canadian government, privileges written documentation over Anishinaabe belts, pipes, and records. It is only recently that the courts have started to admit such important items as evidence. In 1852, Ojibwe Chief Shingwaukose clearly declared the paramount importance of these items to the Anishinaabe understanding of the treaty relationship. On hearing of the discontinuation of gifts from the British, he pointedly stated:

Father—We salute you, we beg of you to believe what we say for though we cannot put down our thoughts on paper as you our Wampums and the records of our old men are as undying as your writings and they do not deceive.⁵

For years after 1852, the chiefs tried to have this foundational treaty (known as the Covenant Chain) abided by. The chiefs submitted numerous petitions, which fell on deaf ears. Eventually, the original belts disappeared, and the chiefs no longer used the belts in "public meetings" with colonial officials. It has only been a recent event that the chiefs, based on the advice of lawyers, have

used the Royal Proclamation as a legal mechanism, instead of the wampum belts, thus supplanting the "records of our old men."

In the summer of 2004, the 240th anniversary of the treaty known as the Covenant Chain, I showed replica belts to the respected and revered elder Akiwinini to see whether he had heard anything about this treaty and these belts. I held them out to him but he just pointed and said, "Maybe that is why we have had such a hard time." 🍁

NOTES

1. Milo Milton Quaife, ed., *Alexander Henry's Travels and Adventures in the Years 1760–1776* (Chicago: Lakeside Press, 1921), 45.
2. LAC RG 10, vol. 6, Proceedings of a Treaty held at Detroit, September 9, 1761.
3. Ibid.
4. *The Papers of Sir William Johnson*, vol. IV, p. 330, Johnson to Gage, February 19, 1764.
5. Speeches of Chiefs in response to hearing the discontinuation of Indian Presents, Manitowaning 1852 [LAC RG 10, vol. 198, pt. 1, nos. 6101–6200, pp. 116405–116408].



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